The Fourth Church Pulpit

LIKE A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

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Pentecost

John M. Buchanan

God is calling people across the face of this country and the world. God's call is to newness for the whole world, not just the church. Those of us who are called into the church have a special vocation to work for the renewal and refreshment of the church, not as an institution out of the past, but as a centering presence from which we may serve the new world that God is creating around us. We have been told that God is making all things new. God is calling us to participate in that new creation. We have also been told that God's time is now.

Loren B. Mead
The Once and Future Church

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Street Chicago IL 60611-2094
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture
Acts 2:1-13

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind."
Acts 2:2a (NRSV)

Anyone who has ever become involved with a church will identify with something Annie Dillard said. Dillard is one of our best working writers, author of a number of books, novels, essays, including a Pulitzer Prize winner. She grew up in the Shadyside Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, attended Sunday School and church camp. She dropped out of church for a while and not long ago returned as a Roman Catholic. And although she does not write much specifically about religion, her work is full of theological sensitivity and artful commentary on matters religious.

Along with a distinguished group of American authors, she was invited to contribute to a book: *Contemporary Writers on the New Testament.* Its title is *Incarnation* and she was assigned the Gospel of Luke. Her contribution to the collection ends with a wry observation that anyone who spends any time around a church will love ...

> "What a pity," Annie Dillard wrote, "that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity, that here come the Christians already, flawed to the core, full of wild ideas and flawed self-importance." [P.36, *Incarnation*, edited by Alfred Corn]

It's true, is it not? The magnificent story of Jesus is a lot more compelling than the reality of the church. The Beatitudes, the feeding of the five thousand, the crucifixion and resurrection are a lot more interesting than the Pope talking about birth control and nobody much paying attention, or the treasurer of a denomination walking away with a lot of money, or the Presbyterians building up a head of steam to have at one another again over issues of inclusivity that the rest of this world seems pretty much to have resolved.

Who hasn't experienced the difference, sometimes the conflict, between the soaring beauty of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, the Psalter's invitation to lift our eyes to the hills, and the reality of the Capital Funds Campaign at St. John's by the gas station, the spat between the Sunday School Superintendent and the Chair of the Buildings and Grounds Committee?

Who hasn't given at least passing thought to trying to follow Jesus, reading the Bible, even participating in corporate public worship, without mixing it up with the local church?

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke University, in a book he says expresses his life-long lover's quarrel with the church observes that:

> "Many approve of both the idea of following Christ and the concept of the church. But they are horrified by the squalid particulars. It was the romantic poet, Southey, who said, 'I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church.'" Willimon quips, "Jesus has many admirers who feel that he married beneath his station." [*What's Right With the Church*, p.3]

Both Annie Dillard, the author, and William Willimon, the preacher, are saying that for better or worse, the church is the point; that after Jesus, here comes the church; and furthermore, that's exactly what God had in mind. And the occasion that expresses it and celebrates it is Pentecost which we know affectionately as the church's birthday.

Fifty days after the crucifixion and resurrection, the followers of Jesus were still in Jerusalem not certain they understood what had happened, not at all certain they knew what to do next. It was on a Jewish feast day, Pentecost, that the situation changed and they knew what they were to do — they were to stay together, to become a new community; together they were to tell the story and to demonstrate in their life together — the new thing that had

happened in Jesus Christ. They were to be "the Church."

Luke's descriptive images get all the attention — "a sound like the rush of a mighty wind — tongues of fire." He is an artist, not a newspaper reporter, Willimon reminds us. Other people who witness whatever happened are interested most in their behavior — "they're drunk," they conclude.

They miss the point — as do we if we focus on the images. The point is something unexpected and strange to be sure, and it's not wind and fire. It's the church! Nobody expected that!

Pentecost celebrates the involvement of God in human life at its most basic levels and in its most relevant contexts. The Spirit of God creates a new human community called the church.

There are those who think that community may be the most relevant issue of our time.

George Washington University professor and former White House Advisor Amitai Etzioni has written a fine book, *The Spirit of Community, the Reinvention of American Society,* which proposes that the loss of community is the most critical problem facing culture because we need community in order to be human, and also community, he argues, is the basis of our common morality — about which we are deeply and rightfully concerned. Tighter rules, stricter discipline don't produce better morality ... stronger communities do. The dividing line was the fifties; a time when community was based on authority and gave not only structure and meaning to life, but also supported a common morality.

> "When your doctor told you that you needed surgery, you did not even think of asking for a second opinion. When your boss ordered you around at work, you did not mention that the Japanese invite the workers to participate in decision-making. When your priest and your father spoke — he spoke with authority." [p.23]

The sixties rightly and appropriately challenged that authoritarian system and the communities on which it rested but, Professor Etzioni suggests,

> "Nothing filled the empty spaces that were left when we razed existing institutions. The result is rampant moral decay and social anarchy ... " and loneliness and isolation and alienation. [p.24]

We even convinced ourselves that the loss of the old community would be liberating. Small town morality gave way to big city freedom. There is a connection, he says, between that and the loss of any kind of common moral expectation. Nothing, he says, is unthinkable anymore: parents dropping children out of windows, crooks robbing people in wheelchairs, our brightest and best taking money from all of us in investment and arbitrage schemes that made Wall Street into a *Den of Thieves,* described by James Stewart, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, in his book by that title.

Etzioni observes that

> "An economy can thrive, at least for awhile, if people watch out only for themselves. But it has become evident that a society cannot function well, given such a self-centered, 'me-istic' orientation."

"Our society is suffering from a severe case of deficient 'we-ness,' restoring communities — and their moral voice is what our current conditions require." The professor described how even big cities seem to turn into urban communities, a phenomenon that is the best of our own city. Even this busy area, with its thousands of tourists and shoppers, is actually — those of us who live here know — a community of neighbors who care about each other and who uphold a common moral expectation for our life together. Professor Etzioni has a modest but important prescription for the renewal of American life. Everyone should intentionally become a participant in some community: a 12-step group for instance — which, by the way, is one of the most health-giving and life-enhancing structures we ever invented — a weekly neighborhood book club, a prayer group, a church.

We are re-discovering the miracle of Pentecost apparently, namely that God, the Creator of life itself, also creates communities in which life is strengthened and supported and healed and renewed. That is what was given at Pentecost. That is the work of God's spirit.

> "The Holy Spirit," Hans Kung writes, "is no other than God himself. The Holy Spirit is not a third party, not a thing between God and us, but God's personal closeness to us."

And so wherever community happens — churches, neighborhoods, families — it is God's spirit at work. But also, wherever and whenever there is restlessness and a refusal to accept the given as the only possible world, I think we see God's spirit at work.

It is God's spirit that creates the church but also makes the church always a little dissatisfied with itself — in its better moments, incapable of resting on its accomplishments. It is God's spirit, I believe, that causes us to be embarrassed over the church's brokenness and it is certainly God's spirit that stimulates the church to leave its comfortable buildings and privileged status and roll up its sleeves and go to work for the healing renewal of the world.

Wherever fresh winds blow in glorious outbursts of human creativity — in Van Gogh's Sunflowers, and Georgia O'Keefe's Irises, and in Ralph Adam Cram's soaring Gothic architecture, and Beethoven's passion — I think we see God's spirit at work.

Whenever human life is most human — when athletes and physicians, dancers and attorneys, teachers and politicians and homemakers reach deep inside themselves to give more, and create more, and be more human God's spirit — which is the source of all life — is at work.

When churches rise up and become great, standing with the oppressed, suffering for the sake of others, or struggling to express the Gospel in an environment of selfless unconcern ... God's spirit is at work.

And when our own life is depleted and we are literally and figuratively out of breath and quietly we feel restoration happen and vitality and willpower return ... God's spirit is at work.

There is a curious blend of meanings of the words — in several languages. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for spirit and wind and breath — are one and the same. And this is what has come to mean the most to me over the years. We reserved Presbyterians are sometimes afraid of the very idea of God's Holy Spirit ... and it's because, like these early witnesses, we get caught up in symbols and miss the meaning. What has come to mean most to me is the Holy Spirit as God's closeness. The very breath I inhale. God — the source of that very basic living, breathing and being that is my life.

God's breath — the wind of creation filling the world with vitality.

God's breath creating the church, this church, the whole holy catholic church, drawing men and women together in new communities.

God's breath — source of my life, restorer of my strength ...

> "Breathe on me, Breath of God,
> Fill me with life anew,
> That I may love what Thou dost love,
> And do what Thou wouldst do."

Amen.